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From The Ghosts of Vasu Master DOWN A DEEP, DEEP WELL

Abstract

The next time Gopu was late, I was ready. I had spent days cleaning up the house- throwing things away, repacking Mangala-Jameela's fragile legacy of distant landscapes, other frayed mementos I considered valuable, putting everything in order. Just in case, I said to myself. It is too late for me to try and leave my sentences unfinished, so I must try to clarify that. Am I, I asked myself over and over again, Mani's teacher and guardian? Let me relegate the opportunities of son, husband, father, to their rightful place in the past; let them slip through my fingers into my dreams. But at the risk of repeating myself, (a risk that seems part of both old age and solitude), am I a teacher, a valuable member of the community?

GITHA HARIHARAN

From *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*

DOWN A DEEP, DEEP WELL

The next time Gopu was late, I was ready. I had spent days cleaning up the house – throwing things away, repacking Mangala-Jameela's fragile legacy of distant landscapes, other frayed mementos I considered valuable, putting everything in order. Just in case, I said to myself.

It is too late for me to try and leave my sentences unfinished, so I must try to clarify that. Am I, I asked myself over and over again, Mani's teacher and guardian? Let me relegate the opportunities of son, husband, father, to their rightful place in the past; let them slip through my fingers into my dreams. But at the risk of repeating myself, (a risk that seems part of both old age and solitude), am I a teacher, a valuable member of the community?

Of course, something happened before that. I have to constantly be on the alert, edit, correct my memory which jumps from one event to the other like a restless pupil, if I am to make a coherent narrative. It was at this time, when I was opening and closing cupboards, disembowelling trunks, that Mani discovered one of my darkest memories. My hours with Mani were now my only respite from the clutter that surrounded me; from the hugger-mugger that precedes a long-deferred journey.

Mani, I asked him one morning as I pulled fresh sheets of paper out of my drawer: Do you remember the firefly I described to you? Can you draw him for me?

Mani nodded and took the paper eagerly from my hands. He set the sheet before him, looked into its blankness for a moment; sitting so still, so unblinking, that I held my breath. Then having unleashed something – a figure, a remembrance – he began to draw.

I looked over his shoulder and saw the unmistakable outline of a firefly taking shape. But this one had recognizably human features: a broad fleshy nose, ripe thick lips. He drew in a pair of magnificently luminous eyes. But they did not, to my surprise, glow with fire; they were limpid, glittering-wet. And the tail: Mani's hand traced one precise arc of light, then shaded it in so it was diffused; visible only through a layer of fine mesh.

I reached for the drawing but he would not let me have it yet. He pushed my hand away gently as if to say, Wait, there's more. The image does not live in empty space.

I held back. With quick strokes he sketched a well below the firefly, so that it seemed to be in danger of imminent descent. The well was deep; its walls solid and menacing. I could imagine a bitter secret settled in its hidden waters.

Mani paused for a critical survey of his handiwork. His hand returned to the drawing for a swift finishing touch. A great monstrous hand now grew out of the well's mouth; its thick, airless fist held the firefly in its firm grasp. The creature's lips, wings, arc of light, all were now hidden. Only the eyes were visible. As he looked at these eyes that had suddenly turned vacuous, I heard a strange cry from Mani, an eerie, high-pitched exorcism. At the same instant my hand flew to cover my mouth, which had stretched wide open in imitation.

Mani's drawing flashed before me later that night as I confronted the last bit of evidence I was packing – a photograph of my father in his youth. Before I put it away into Mangala's tin trunk, I looked at it once again.

I looked at his solid, homely nose, the wavy hair, the full, generous mouth; at every feature I had seen and loved a hundred times before.

But I also saw and heard something else, something new: his eyes, piercing and penetrating as in real life, glinted at me and taunted me like the crow. Behind this magnetic spectre grew a long line of crows, progressively decrepit and prostrate as my eye went further and further back. Then the chain of forefathers disappeared and I heard, for a horrible, deafening moment, a band of crows swooping down into a valley ringed with hills, their caws amplified into a mocking, resounding laughter.

From this distance, I can make a confession. It was not a simple case of either-or; a smile or a taunt. The photograph, stubbornly one-dimensional, could not fit in all of him at the same time.

As I looked, I saw his other face: firm, uncompromising as ever. I drew a tentative fingertip across the lips that had rarely remained shut; that even now I expected would suddenly strike terror in my heart with its quick, harsh words. The lush eyebrows moved up a fraction as my finger re-drew their mocking shape. And below them were those magnetic eyes which I had as a child thought impossible to soften; which I had thought incapable of tears.

As I gazed at the eagle eyes, always watchful, never missing a thing, I felt my own tenderness begin to flow. The eagle eyes blurred, misted over; when it cleared I saw that his face had settled into a bewildered sadness. This face was vulnerable to old age, no longer a stranger to doubt; no longer invincible. It seemed to echo my weak-hearted question: Am I redundant? with an equally hesitant query – Was it all futile?

I was now travelling ahead with him to the end, well past the confident days of irrepressible quotations, explanations, lectures. I heard him in the front porch again, the last time I saw him alive.

He sat, as of old, flanked by the crumbling pillars, Ganesan and Ganapati. But his bare shoulders, once so firm and fleshy, sagged; bone and wrinkle clearly evident. Now and then, his lifelong posture gave way in an unguarded moment; his back stooped, unwilling to bear its burden.

I saw him rally briefly – my sudden visit to Nageswaram must have called to mind more garrulous days – and he looked around, casting about for an opening.

Ganapati and Ganesan loyally prompted him. You were saying, saar, croaked Ganapati out of the barrel of his flesh. Something about ayurveda's sister-science?

Ah, yes, said my father, his face brightening for a moment. I am going to spend the rest of my life studying the healing art of unani – very very closely. My old friend, the hakim, tells me unani not only helps a person overcome present disturbances, but also gives him the power to resist new, further disturbances. There is room in ayurveda – and at the word my father suddenly remembered one of the numerous blows recently received.

Don't talk to me about ayurveda, he snapped at Ganapati. Didn't I tell you about the money-spinning ayurvedic pills flooding the market?

Ayurvedic market – he said once again as if he couldn't believe such a conjunction of words possible. Ayurveda! These fools wouldn't be able to tell apart an ayur or a veda from their arses.

Ganapati shrugged covertly at Ganesan as if to signal: Your turn now.

Ganesan frowned in search of a more suitable topic of discourse. Ah, he then began, his forehead cleared briefly of its perpetual furrows: There's a meeting next week. The brahmin association of Nageswaram is meeting to plan its course of action.

My father remained bitterly silent, unwilling to rise to the bait. He continued to chew his thick lower lip, playing deaf.

I was wondering, doctor, said Ganesan, a little louder this time. I got a circular to say that we should all go. With all these other people all over the place, you know (he coughed delicately), we brahmins must keep together. Otherwise what's the use of independence?

My father stirred restlessly. I saw the shadow of a freshly fought struggle flit briefly across his face. Then he spat out the shortest, most precise diagnosis he ever made in his life.

Where is our new republic? he demanded. We live in a divided house and you talk of a bigger, bloodier share. Go if you want – go spread some more of the poison that is choking all of us.

He laid a threatening arm on Ganesan's bony shoulder. But his voice was husky when he spoke again: Who murdered Gandhi? Who is murdering his child?

As these questions echoed in my head, their passionately interrogative quality diluted in my memory and rendered more plaintive, I was looking again into the deep well behind the old house in Nageswaram. I saw, not

my father's body that they fished out of the well before I got the telegram in Elipettai, but a dark deposit at the very bottom. Between this murky substance and me the distance seemed to shrink; only a few inches of water remained.

It didn't happen exactly that way either. Memories, particularly moments of love and pain, come back again and again, but in fragments; from a subtly different vantage point each time. All I can attempt, as I have said before, is the semblance of a whole; a testimony of sorts.

The memory of that bewilderment which seeped into the familiar, dearly-loved features; that worked so fast that it seemed to conquer the face overnight, reduce its varied, rich range of expressions to one unchanging question mark: this is the photograph that placed itself firmly before me those last days in Elipettai, as I sorted out, discarded, packed.

I lie now in a whitewashed room, the pale bare walls reflecting the relentless glare of sunlight. There are no hiding places here; no cracks, crevices, dark shadows, shady peepal by the window. No ghost has easy entry into this functional sick room for an elderly man, a quiet patient entirely preoccupied with his own thoughts.

But this new room – which I did not seek, which was not part of my plan – is also a blessing. When the sea breeze sets in late in the afternoon, my mind is alert again. The body given over to the care of others is no longer the sole figure onstage; no longer audible. In this period of remission, I am free to continue with my narrative. I can confess to ragged edges, loose ends, the inability to cloak the incomplete self. I can admit to a lifelong greed for something vital: love, meaning, a few other scarce commodities. Then, in my unexpected exile, rooms and houses fall into place; and ghosts. They grow in visibility till their radiance assures me that my malady is not hopeless or permanent.

But let me get back to the time I was speaking of; the point when I began to feel the need to stretch the canvas I shared with Mani. His face now accommodated more than one look. In addition to his quiet but absorbed response to my stories, he had allowed himself one more role – a more active one, which engaged him in his own creation of myth and symbol on paper. It was time to prepare Mani for a wider world than my room.

So in the course of our more advanced lessons the cast increased; we travelled beyond individual frailties, beyond the dangers of PG and Elipettai. With my father behind us and Gopu before, we were on our way to a forest that we had heard was once very beautiful; a kind of show-piece of the ancient world. But by the time we got there, by the time we got an aerial view so to speak, it was definitely a bruised, raggedy landscape; so that it was with deep sadness (but without my father's rage or bitterness, I hope), that I let Mani hear about Scorpion and his kind; about the sting in the scorpion's tail.

THE STING IN THE SCORPION'S TAIL

We are looking, Grey Mouse told Blue Bottle, at a forest that was shaped like a heart. Quite naturally it was called Heart Forest. Not only because of obvious reasons of shape, but also because it needed, like any live heart, all kinds of veins, arteries, capillaries, for the entire contraption to work.

(Grey paused, distracted by this digression that brought before him images of blood; bleeding hearts, broken hearts. Luckily he remembered Blue Bottle was waiting; and that the lesson was for his benefit.)

Grey said to Blue bottle: Anyway – we are looking at Heart Forest on a very special day; actually night; in fact close to midnight. At the stroke of midnight, there was one long moment of utter stillness. Then as on a signal, a flock of large, chalky birds took off, a little clumsy from lack of exercise, into the darkness above. They circled the forest sky, once, twice, in a grim silence broken only by the flapping of their wings. Their sharp white beaks were shut because they held on firmly to numerous little souvenirs. The creatures below, straining their eyes to see the white-beaked ones go, saw the glitter on a beak or two; a last glimpse of a stolen jewel.

The creatures heard the beating of wings above and their hearts were full. No one said a word yet. They were afraid that if they did, they might wake up: they had dreamt of this moment for so long. Then as the flapping sound grew fainter and they could see the night sky again, the natives of Heart Forest came to life. They looked at each other and at the large, wild, ravaged forest around them. The white-beaked ones had gone at last; now where were they to begin?

They trooped to a huge banyan tree in the centre of the forest, and gathered round the sparkle of light on one of its myriad hanging roots. Aware of a million eager eyes on him, the sparkle of light – Old Glow-Worm – joined them on the ground beneath the tree. In the depths of the night, in the heart of Heart Forest, thousands and thousands of insects of all sizes and shapes surrounded Old Glow-Worm, pressing closer to him in their eagerness.

Come closer, he urged, as everyone pushed and jostled in a friendly, sweaty way, saying, Make room, make room!

What next, Old Glow? a few of the grandfather-insects shouted.

Shhh, said others.

Glow waited till they were silent. Meanwhile they looked at him, at the amazing number of finely-cut mirrors that glistened on his body. The Heart Foresters had in fact given Glow an appropriate title: Diamond. The little ones had affectionately simplified this to Old Man Mirror.

Old Man Mirror shone in the dark like a skilfully cut diamond; he was made up of a hundred intricate facets. Each of these mirror-bits threw

back a different kind of reflection, so that it was often difficult to understand Diamond; to see him whole; to sum him up in a few words.

First thing, said Diamond, breaking the silence with his soft and whispery but surprisingly effective voice. Every one of us is entitled to a light of his own.

Everyone! exclaimed a fat firefly, unable to control himself. Even Dung Beetle?

Yes, said Diamond firmly.

But where were they to get the lights? It seemed to them that the white-beaked ones had been around forever. And they had always been vigilant, ready to swoop down from their heights – so that over the years, the Heart Foresters had got used to crawling around in the dark, safe undergrowth.

Diamond knew words were not enough at this point. So in reply to this question, he went up to a winged creature in the front row. He gently slipped off the tight, striped band that bound his back. He stroked the raw, sore flesh that had been deprived of air for so long. Like magic, or a prophecy come true at last, the flesh slowly began to heal; acquire a dull glow.

The word spread as rapidly as a forest fire. Stripping, stroking, healing, glowing: this went on in all parts of the forest. Everywhere the insects helped each other shed their old striped uniforms; hope filled the hearts of the humblest of worms.

The forest was no longer dark. So soon after the white-beaked ones had taken their belated, graceless leave, the night sparkled with reborn glows of a thousand colours and shades. The glow grew in different parts of different insects – the back, the front; the eyes, the wings.

Diamond and his helpers did not rest for a moment. Diamond kept a special watch on the dung beetles and earthworms. He took his little band of silkworms with him wherever he went. They tried out the ideas they saw in his reflections, even if a few seemed absurd. They wove fine and intricate sheets of silk as they recorded the innumerable types of insects in the forest; and the incredible range of glows and colours they seemed to produce.

Old Firefly sat on the banyan tree (now illuminated all along its airy roots). He looked around and sighed with deep content.

Ahh, he said to his old cronies perched near him, look at our beautiful forest! We have begun to rebuild it. It will grow again – every inch of it.

And indeed it was a wonderful sight.

Heart Forest had always been well-known for its living, breathing, growing ocean of heads and wings. (This was something the white-beaked ones had particularly despised and feared.) But tonight Heart Forest seemed to have outdone itself. From the banyan tree as far as the eye could see, the night was ablaze with a rich, multitudinous range of colours. The whole spectacular cast was there: horseflies, bees, wasps,

hornets, earthworms, silkworms, beetles, fireflies, ladybugs, spiders, earwigs, moths, ants, termites, on and on. And as the insects reclaimed the forest, the colours mingled so that new shades were being born under their very eyes; colours without a name, colours alive and growing. And Heart Forest did not do all this in its earlier cowed silence, but in a friendly cacophony of chirping and buzzing, and an incessant whirring of tongues.

Diamond paused for a minute in the midst of his long hours of travel. His eyes filled with tears of joy, and sorrow as well. He saw, side by side with the hope and light, the stretches of dried-up forest, arid deserts; burnt clearings, chopped logs lying like corpses. He turned away wearily to the other side of the forest, towards its life-giving river. Diamond stiffened. He saw what he had feared: Scorpion and his brood, fattened for years by the white-beaked ones, had crawled out of their holes into the open.

Come, said Diamond to his travelling party of silkworms, dung beetles and earthworms. Our task is not yet done.

A long, winding procession of pin-point lights flowed in a glittering ribbon across the forest night. It lit up every foot of earth on the way; it protected the humblest bug. As the ribbon moved forward, little insects with newly acquired glows silently fell into place at its tail end.

But when they got to the river, they saw that they were just a little too late. Scorpion had been working – even in his exile underground. His brood, mere eggs earlier, had hatched and been fed; and they had grown their share of poisonous stings.

Scorpion and his kind waved their evil tails and stung anyone who didn't appreciate the taste of their poison. They were so depraved that they even stung their own kind sometimes; so anxious were they to keep in practice.

Diamond and his followers spread themselves on the two sides of the river bank, two protective semi-circles. They saw the river choked with wings, stings, mutilated meat. The water no longer flowed; it was a stagnant pool of rust-coloured blood; a big spreading stain of rotting bodies.

They limped back to the banyan. Rebuilding the forest was going to be even more difficult than they had thought, especially with Scorpion on the loose. (When Old Firefly saw the number of descendants Scorpion had sired, he spluttered with rage; his glow grew weaker as did his heart; he knew there was very little left to live for.)

But Diamond did not give up. Tears poured down his face; he saw bleeding and broken hearts wherever he looked, but there was no question of giving up. He called them all round the banyan again. We will go on, he told them. We will go on, but this time we will convert the Scorpion followers first.

These scorpion followers – what were they like? Not all of them could

sting and kill like their masters. But still it was impossible to live with them; or convert them. To begin with, they were deaf. The rumour was that Scorpion poured a little of his poison into their ears once a month, which blocked up their ears and twisted their faces with the bitterness of hatred. And they began their training young: the baby scorpions were protected under the sting till they were full-grown, so that their earliest view of the world, their mother's milk, was clouded with poison.

What did Scorpion and his followers want? They claimed the astonishing variety of insects in Heart Forest was unnatural; that the different colours of their new glow hurt their eyes; that the forest had lived in perpetual darkness in its golden age a million years ago.

What do you suggest then, asked Diamond, gentle as ever. (Some, especially the young wasps, said: Maddeningly gentle.)

The river is a natural divider, hissed Scorpion. Wings separate, worms separate. Front-glows there, back-glows here. And side-glows and nose-glows and toe-glows – well, we'll think of some place for them ... (And the poison churned in him with excitement, thinking of the chaos to follow – the stings and the corpses and the river of blood.)

The silkworms and wasps chased Scorpion and his kind back to their hiding holes, but everyone knew this was only a brief remission; Scorpion was now a fact of life.

But what they did not know was what would happen the next night. The next night, a back-glow, driven mad by an extra-large dose of scorpion-poison, threw a large rock right at the heart of Diamond.

They watched, horrified, as a thousand glittering shards of mirror fell off the banyan tree and flew in different directions to all the corners of the forest. (From then on, Diamond was rarely seen whole; always as one incomplete reflection.)

Diamond was gone; only the broken pieces of mirror remained. The river no longer flowed since it was choked again. Soon it congealed – as if it could never forget that it had been used to divide the forest.

So, said Grey to Blue Bottle, it is impossible to forget any part of Heart Forest; any part of its sufferings; or be a citizen of one strip, this side of the river or that.

And that, continued Grey, is only part of the lesson. The real lesson is a danger that is now always there, almost as much of a fixture as the crow. (Grey wiped an eye surreptitiously with his paw.) Blue, he concluded gently, while we evade, trick and outmanoeuvre the likes of Spider, Bandicoot and Crow, we should not forget Heart Forest's special inheritance of enemies: the descendants of Scorpion and his kind.